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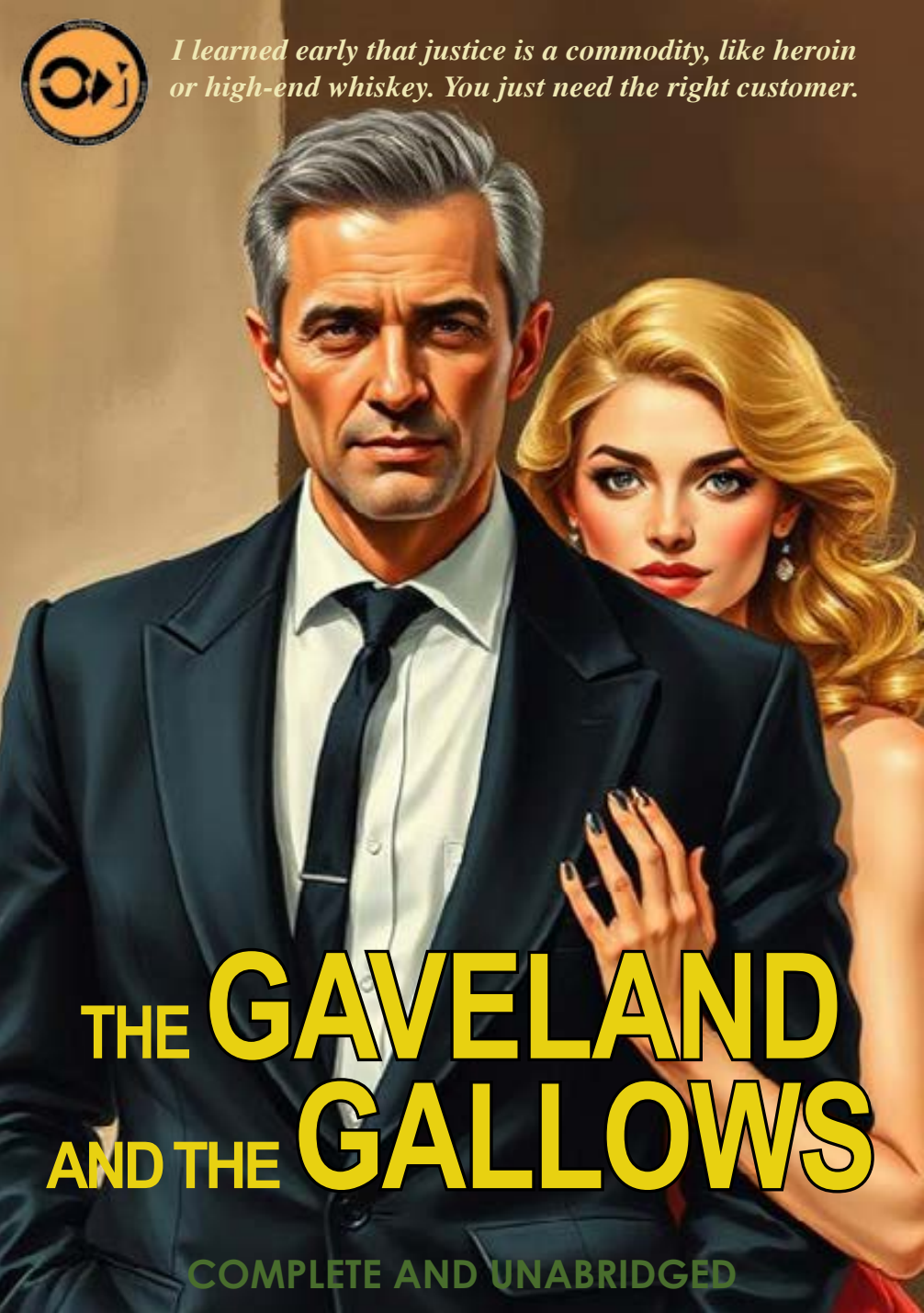

THE GAVELAND AND THE GALLOWS

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Ovi Pulp

The gaveland and the gallows

Complete and unabridged

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The stench of prison disinfectant couldn't mask the sweeter smell of money. I've sat on the bench for twenty-two years, watched the guilty squirm and the innocent break. I learned early that justice is a commodity, like heroin or high-end whiskey. You just need the right customer.

My customer was Vince Croaker, head jailer at Ridgemore State Penitentiary. A thick-necked brute with the imagination of a broken brick. He thought we were partners. He thought the thirty percent I skimmed from his bribes was the price of my robe and my signature on a few creative parole documents.

He didn't know I was also sleeping with his wife, Lena.

Every Tuesday, while Vince was counting inmates at lockdown, I was counting the freckles on Lena's shoulders in a motel off the interstate. She told me Vince was a dull animal. She told me she wanted him gone. I agreed. Not for love, I don't have that organ. But because Vince was getting greedy. He wanted a bigger cut. He wanted to know the judge's other clients.

You can't have a partner who asks questions.

So I decided to destroy him. Not with a gun. That's for amateurs. I'd use the law. I'd frame him for the very crimes we committed together. And when he rotted in a cell, I'd have his wife, his money, and his silence.

What Vince didn't know was that revenge isn't a straight line. It's a noose. And I was about to hang him with his own rope.

But even I didn't see the last twist. That's the thing about the gallows. They have a way of reminding you who really holds the gavel.

The client with the dead eyes

The courtroom was a tomb. I liked it that way. The Honorable Judge Marshall Cross, presiding. The name alone made defendants sweat. Today, however, I wasn't on the bench. I was in my chambers, late evening, the rain drilling against the stained glass like nervous fingers.

Vince Croaker let himself in without knocking. He was wearing his gray guard's uniform, shirt stretched over a gut built on cheap beer and expensive hate.

"We got a live one, Judge," he said, tossing a manila folder on my mahogany desk. "Name's Dario Mance. In for armed robbery. Looking at twelve years. He's got three hundred K liquid."

I didn't touch the folder. "You verified?"

"My cousin in the DA's office ran the serial numbers. Clean as Sunday mass." Vince grinned, showing teeth like yellow dice. "Mance wants out in thirty days. Medical parole. Fake tumor. You sign, I file, he walks."

"My fee is one hundred," I said. "Up front. Plus your thirty."

Vince's grin faltered. "That's new. We always did twenty for you."

"Inflation," I said, pouring myself a bourbon. "The risk is higher. The new governor is appointing a prison oversight committee. You want me to keep signing, you pay the premium."

He stood there, fists clenching. Then he nodded. "Fine. But next time, we renegotiate."

"There won't be a next time if you don't deliver the cash by Friday."

He left, slamming the door. I finished my drink and called Lena.

"He's getting suspicious," I told her.

"Then we move faster," she whispered. Her voice was honey over a razor blade. "I found his safety de-

posit box key. He keeps a ledger. All the names, all the payments."

"Get it tomorrow. And Lena?"

"Yes, darling?"

"Don't fall in love with the idea of freedom. Fall in love with the money."

She laughed. That was the moment I should have known she was more dangerous than Vince.

I locked my chambers and walked through the empty courthouse. The portraits of dead judges lined the walls, their eyes following me. They knew. The building knew. Even the marble floors reflected my guilt back at me in faint, distorted shapes.

Outside, the rain had turned to sleet. My Mercedes waited in the judge's reserved spot. I sat behind the wheel for a long minute, watching the homeless man huddled against the courthouse steps. He was drunk, muttering. Last year, I'd sentenced a woman to three years for stealing diapers for her baby. The homeless man had urinated on the steps a hundred times. No one touched him.

That was the difference between justice and law. Law was for the poor. Justice was for sale.

I drove to my penthouse on the river. The doorman greeted me with a salute. The elevator played soft classical music. Inside, I poured another bourbon and opened the folder Vince had given me.

Dario Mance. Age forty-four. Three prior convictions: assault, grand theft auto, and a firearms violation. He'd shot a security guard during the robbery. The guard was paralyzed from the waist down. Mance showed no remorse in his file. His psychological evaluation used words like "antisocial" and "predatory."

He was exactly my kind of client.

I took out my judicial fountain pen, a gift from the Bar Association and signed the medical parole recommendation. I backdated it by two weeks to make it look like the process had begun before Mance even knew about it. Then I forged the signature of the court clerk and the stamp of the presiding judge's office. I had my own stamp, of course. Made by a forger in Cleveland who thought I was a collector of legal memorabilia.

Three signatures. One lie. A man would walk free.

I placed the document in a clean folder and locked

it in my safe. Tomorrow, Vince would file it. In thirty days, Dario Mance would be sipping champagne in Cancún while the guard he shot sat in a wheelchair, pissing into a bag.

That was the system. I didn't break it. I just greased the gears.

My phone buzzed. A text from Lena: *"Got the key. Meet me tomorrow. Same place. Noon."*

I didn't reply. I stared at the ceiling and thought about my wife, Eleanor. She'd been dead ten years. Cancer of the pancreas. Six weeks from diagnosis to grave. She was the only person who ever called me "Marsh." She was the only person who made me feel like something other than a machine in a robe.

After she died, I tried to be good. I really did. For about eighteen months, I ruled fairly, slept alone, and donated to charities. Then the first bribe came. A defense attorney named Leo Karr offered me ten thousand dollars to reduce a DUI charge for his senator client. I said no. He offered twenty. I said no. He offered fifty and a weekend with a woman he described as "a work of art."

I said yes to the fifty. The woman came later. She was Lena.

That was four years ago. I hadn't looked back. The money was too good. The power was too sweet. And Lena ...Lena was a sickness I didn't want to cure.

But now she wanted half. And Vince wanted more. And Dario Mance wanted freedom.

Everyone wanted something. And I was the man who decided who got what.

I finished the bourbon and went to bed alone. In my dreams, Eleanor stood at the foot of the bed, shaking her head slowly. She didn't speak. She didn't need to.

I woke up at 3 a.m. sweating. The dream was already fading. But the guilt wasn't. It never did. It just got buried under the next bribe, the next lie, the next body.

And bodies were coming. I could feel it.

The anatomy of a bribe

The next morning, I presided over a triple homicide case. The defendant was a nineteen-year-old kid with hollow eyes. He was guilty as hell. I sentenced him to life without parole. The gallery wept. I felt nothing.

After court, I met Dario Mance in the holding cells beneath the courthouse. Vince arranged it. Mance was a slim man with dead eyes and a tailored prison jumpsuit. He smelled of expensive cologne smuggled in a shampoo bottle.

"Judge Cross," he said, shaking my hand like we were closing a real estate deal. "I hear you're the man who can part the Red Sea."

"I can part your wallet," I said. "Three hundred thousand. My associate explained the terms."

"I want a guarantee."

"There are no guarantees in law. Only probabilities. I give you a medical parole recommendation, signed. Vince files it. The parole board is three old friends who owe me favors. Probability ...ninety-five percent."

Mance smiled. It was the smile of a shark that's learned to wear a tie. "And the five percent?"

"The governor's watchdog. If he sniffs, you stay inside and I deny everything. You'll be dead to me."

"Fair enough." He slid a folded bank check across the steel table. Made out to cash. "The rest when I'm out."

I pocketed the check. "Don't unpack."

The holding cell smelled of vomit and fear. Mance didn't smell of either. He was calm. That made him dangerous. Men who can commit violence without a tremor are the ones who kill without a thought.

I left the cells and walked to the courthouse garage. My car was there, but I didn't get in. I leaned against

the concrete pillar and lit a cigarette. I'd quit ten years ago, but I'd started again last month. The stress was getting to me.

Vince appeared from the shadows. He was good at that, appearing. Like a cockroach.

"Mance happy?" he asked.

"Mance is a sociopath. He's never happy. He's just less unhappy than before."

"The check?"

"In my pocket. Your thirty comes after he's out."

Vince's jaw tightened. "No. My thirty now. That was the deal."

"The deal changed when you asked for forty percent last week. You want loyalty, buy a dog."

He stepped closer. He was six inches taller and eighty pounds heavier. But I wasn't afraid. I've stared down murderers and rapists. A fat jailer with a gambling problem didn't scare me.

"You think you're untouchable, Judge?"

"I think I'm the only thing standing between you

and a federal indictment. You lose me, you lose the golden goose. And then you go back to shaking down inmates for candy bars. So back off."

He didn't move for a long moment. Then he laughed. It was a ugly sound, like rocks in a blender.

"You got balls, I'll give you that. Fine. After Mance walks. But the next one, I get forty. Non-negotiable."

He walked away, his boots echoing off the concrete.

I finished my cigarette and drove to the motel off the interstate. The Sunset Motor Lodge. Eighty dollars a night, cash only. The owner was a blind man named Ahmed who asked no questions. I parked in the back, took the stairs to room 12, and knocked twice.

Lena opened the door.

She was thirty-eight, five years younger than me. Red hair that she dyed every three weeks. Green eyes that could make a priest forget his vows. She wore a silk robe that fell open as she pulled me inside.

"You're late," she said.

"I was conducting justice."

She laughed and kissed me. Her mouth tasted of gin

and lipstick. She pushed me onto the bed and sat on my lap.

"I have the ledger," she said.

"Show me."

She reached into her purse and pulled out a black moleskin book. I opened it. Vince's handwriting. Blocky, uneducated, but precise. Every bribe. Every inmate. Every date. Over four million dollars in four years.

"This is dynamite," I said.

"That's why I want half of everything. The money, the house, and a new identity. You give me that, I disappear. You don't, I mail this to the FBI myself."

I closed the ledger. "You blackmail me?"

"I leverage my position. You taught me that."

I looked at her. Really looked. She wasn't afraid. She wasn't even excited. She was cold. Colder than me. I'd made a mistake thinking she was just a pretty accessory. She was a player.

"Half," I said. "But only after Vince is in prison.

And you testify against him in a closed hearing. Then you get your money and you vanish. Deal?"

"Deal." She kissed me again. "Now stop talking and earn your half."

Later, as she slept, I called Emil Voss. The Tallyman. He was a fixer who worked for the cartels but freelanced on the side. He answered on the first ring.

"I need a woman disappeared," I said. "After a certain date. Make it look like an accident."

"Name and price."

"Lena Croaker. Fifty thousand."

"Sixty. She's pretty. Pretty ones are harder."

"Sixty. But only after she testifies. Not before."

"You're the boss. Send me a photo and her usual locations."

I hung up and looked at Lena's sleeping face. She was beautiful. And she was dead. She just didn't know it yet.

That was the business I was in. Not justice. Not law. Betrayal.

I got dressed and left before she woke up. The rain had stopped. The sky was the color of a bruise. I drove home and slept for three hours.

In the morning, I looked at myself in the bathroom mirror. Judge Marshall Cross. Sixty-two years old. Gray hair, sharp jaw, eyes that had seen too much. I didn't recognize the man staring back.

But I didn't look away either.

The first crack

Vince noticed Lena acting strange. He showed up at my chambers two days later, reeking of bourbon and rage.

"She's got a new perfume," he said, looming over my desk. "Expensive. Not the drugstore shit I buy her. You know anything about that, Judge?"

I kept my face a mask of judicial boredom. "I know you're in my office without an appointment, making accusations that border on slander. I'd advise you to leave before I call bailiffs."

"You call anyone, and I tell the world about the Mance deal. It's not signed yet. The parole hearing is next week. One phone call from me and the board gets an anonymous tip."

He was bluffing. But a bluffed man with a badge and a ledger is still a threat. I stood up slowly, walked around the desk, and put my hand on his shoulder.

"Vince," I said softly, "we've made each other rich. Don't throw it away because your wife bought herself a nice scent. Maybe she's just feeling good. Maybe she's planning a surprise for you."

He blinked. The bourbon fogged his reason. "A surprise?"

"Anniversary's next month, isn't it?"

He nodded, uncertain.

"Go home. Kiss her. Then get me the Mance file. We have work to do."

He left, stumbling. I poured a whiskey and stared at the framed photo on my desk—my late wife, Eleanor. Dead ten years. Cancer. She was the only person I ever loved. After she died, the rot set in. First small bribes. Then big ones. Then the affair with Lena just to feel something.

I wasn't a judge anymore. I was a predator wearing a robe.

That night, Emil Voss called. "The woman. You want her gone before or after the husband?"

"After. I need her to testify against him in a closed hearing first. Then she has an accident. Make it look like a carjacking."

"Expensive. Fifty thousand."

"Done."

I hung up and looked at the ledger. Fifty-three names. Fifty-three felons I'd set free. Some had killed again. I didn't care. Justice was a word the poor used to comfort themselves. The rich used money. I used both.

But the crack in Vince's trust was widening. And cracks let in light. And light shows the gallows.

Three days later, Vince didn't show for our scheduled meeting. I called his cell. No answer. I called the prison. They said he'd called in sick.

I drove to his house. It was a modest split-level in a blue-collar neighborhood. The lawn was overgrown. A child's tricycle rusted in the driveway. Vince and Lena had a daughter, age nine, who lived with Lena's mother most of the time. I'd never met her. I didn't want to.

I knocked. No answer. I used the key Lena had given me.

The house smelled of stale beer and burned coffee. Dishes piled in the sink. A TV played infomercials to an empty room. I found Vince in the basement, sitting in the dark, holding a revolver.

He wasn't pointing it at me. He was just holding it. Staring at it.

"Vince?"

He looked up. His eyes were red. Not from crying, from lack of sleep.

"She left me," he said. "Lena. She took the girl and left. Said she needed space. Space." He laughed bitterly. "She's been needing space for six months. I know she's seeing someone. I just don't know who."

I sat down across from him. The basement smelled of mold and regret.

"Maybe she's just stressed," I said. "The marriage. The job. You've been working a lot."

"I've been working for you." He pointed the revolver at me. Not aiming. Just gesturing. "You and your

fucking deals. I used to be a good man, Judge. I used to help people."

"You still help people. You help them get out."

"Out of prison. Into the world. To kill again." He put the gun down. "I'm tired. I want out."

"You can't get out. We're in too deep."

"Then we go down together." He stood up. "I'm serious, Cross. Next time you ask me to file a fake parole; I'm going to the FBI. I don't care if I go to jail. At least I'll have a clear conscience."

I almost laughed. A clear conscience. Vince Croaker, who'd taken bribes from murderers, who'd looked the other way while inmates raped other inmates, who'd sold his soul for thirty percent—now he wanted a clear conscience.

"Think about it," I said. "Sleep on it. We'll talk tomorrow."

I left him in the dark.

In my car, I called Lena. She answered on the first ring.

"Where are you?" I asked.

"With my mother. In Ohio. Vince can't find me here."

"He knows about someone. Not me. But he knows you're cheating."

"Let him know. I don't care anymore. I have the ledger. I have the power. When do I testify?"

"Soon. Stay put. I'll call you."

I hung up and drove to the courthouse. The night shift janitor nodded at me. I nodded back. In my chambers, I opened the safe and took out the Mance parole file. I looked at my signature. Looked at the forged stamps.

Then I took a lighter and burned it.

Mance would have to wait. I couldn't risk Vince talking before the frame was complete. I needed to move faster. I needed to destroy Vince before he destroyed me.

I called Assistant DA Farris Coyle. He was as crooked as I was, but in different ways. He took bribes to lose evidence. He was perfect.

"I have a proposition," I said.

"I'm listening."

"A jailer named Vince Croaker. He's been running a bribery scheme for years. I have proof. I want him prosecuted. In exchange, you get the credit, and I get immunity for any minor irregularities in my past."

There was a long silence. Then Coyle laughed. "Minor irregularities? Judge, you're a walking felony."

"Are you interested or not?"

"I'm interested. But I want the proof in my hand by Friday. And I want a video confession from Croaker. You get that, you get your immunity."

"Done."

I hung up. The game was set. Vince would confess on tape. Lena would testify. Coyle would prosecute. And I would walk away clean.

But first, I had to catch a jailer.

The trap is baited

I spent the next forty-eight hours building a cage around Vince Croaker without him knowing it. The first step was isolating him from his allies. I called the warden of Ridgemore, a man named Harold Pence who owed me for dismissing a harassment lawsuit against him and suggested that Vince take a mandatory leave of absence for "stress management."

Pence didn't ask questions. He just did it.

Vince was put on administrative leave that afternoon. His prison credentials were revoked. His access to the inmate database was cut. He was a jailer without a jail.

He called me, furious. "What the hell, Cross? You got me suspended?"

"I saved you," I said smoothly. "The oversight committee is looking at the prison. If they interviewed you right now, in your current mental state, you'd crack. Take two weeks off. Go to a spa. I'll pay for it."

"I don't want a spa. I want my job."

"Your job will be there when you get back. Trust me."

He hung up. He didn't trust me. That was fine. Trust was overrated. Fear was better.

The second step was Lena. I drove to Ohio that night, to her mother's house. It was a small ranch on the edge of a cornfield. The mother was a frail woman with dementia who thought I was a pastor. Lena met me on the porch.

"You shouldn't have come here," she said. "Vince might follow you."

"Vince is on leave. He's home drinking himself to death. We have time."

I told her the plan, she would testify before a grand jury in a closed session. She would hand over the ledger. She would name Vince as the mastermind. In re-

turn, she would receive full immunity and a new identity.

"And my half?" she asked.

"After Vince is convicted. You'll get a certified check for two million dollars. You can go anywhere. Do anything. Forget this ever happened."

She studied my face. Those green eyes missed nothing.

"You're lying," she said softly. "You're going to kill me after I testify."

I didn't flinch. "If I wanted you dead, you'd be dead already. I'm not Vince. I don't solve problems with violence. I solve them with paperwork."

She laughed. It was a cold sound. "You're worse than Vince. He's a brute. You're a snake. But fine. I'll testify. Set it up."

I set it up for the following Tuesday. That gave me five days to prepare Vince's video confession.

The third step was the trickiest. I needed Vince to confess on camera without knowing he was being recorded. I couldn't just ask him. He wasn't that stupid. I

had to manipulate him into confessing to someone he thought was a friend.

I hired an actor. A man named Ray Dolan who'd played bit parts in cop shows. He was forty, balding, with a friendly face and no morals. I paid him five thousand dollars to pose as an inmate who'd been released through Vince's scheme. He was to visit Vince at his home, thank him profusely, and get him talking. The conversation would be recorded by a hidden camera in a gift basket.

"What if he doesn't talk?" Ray asked.

"He will. He's lonely and drunk and he wants to feel important. Just ask him how he did it. He'll brag. They always brag."

Ray practiced his lines. I watched from a van parked down the street, monitoring the video feed.

At 7 p.m., Ray knocked on Vince's door. Vince opened it, bleary-eyed, wearing a stained undershirt. He looked ten years older than he had a week ago.

"Mr. Croaker?" Ray said, grinning. "You don't know me, but I'm Danny Portman. You got me out of Ridgemore last year. Armed robbery, reduced to time served. I just wanted to say thank you."

Vince squinted at him. "I don't remember you."

"That's the point, right? You helped so many people. Can I come in? I brought bourbon."

Vince stepped aside. The door closed.

The camera showed Vince's living room. It was a disaster area, empty pizza boxes, beer bottles, a TV playing old westerns. Vince sat on the couch. Ray sat across from him, pouring two glasses.

"To freedom," Ray said, toasting.

Vince drank. Then he drank again.

"You want to know how it works?" Vince said, his words slurring. "It's simple. The judge signs the papers. I file them. Money changes hands. Nobody asks questions."

"The judge? You mean Judge Cross?"

Vince nodded. "Cross. The Honorable Marshall Cross. He's a bastard. A greedy, lying bastard. But he's good at what he does. Best forger I've ever seen."

"He forges documents?"

"Everything. Signatures. Stamps. Medical reports.

He's got a guy in Cleveland makes the stamps. Unbelievable quality." Vince laughed. "One time, he forged a death certificate for an inmate who was very much alive. Just walked him out the front gate in a body bag."

Ray leaned forward. "And the money? Where does it go?"

"Offshore. Cross has accounts in the Caymans, Switzerland, maybe Dubai. I don't know. I just get my thirty percent. Thirty percent of four million dollars. Not bad for a jailer, huh?"

"Not bad at all." Ray kept pouring. "And the ledger? I heard you keep a ledger."

Vince's eyes narrowed. "Who told you about the ledger?"

"Word gets around. Inmates talk."

Vince stood up, unsteady. "Maybe you should leave."

"Sure, sure. One more drink?"

Vince sat back down. "Fine. One more. Then you go."

They drank. Vince talked for another twenty minutes. He named names. He gave dates. He described

the bribery process in detail. He even bragged about how he'd once threatened an inmate's family to get a payment.

It was beautiful. Everything I needed.

At 8:30, Ray left. Vince passed out on the couch. I drove the van back to my garage and downloaded the video. Three hours of footage. I edited it down to thirty minutes of pure confession.

Then I made three copies. One for Coyle. One for my safe. One for insurance.

The trap was baited. All I had to do was spring it.

The grand jury

Tuesday arrived like a thunderstorm. Dark clouds over the courthouse. The air thick and heavy. I wore my best robe, black silk with silver trim. The robe of a man who'd never lost a case.

The grand jury was convened in secret. Only the prosecutor, the jurors, and the witness were allowed. No defense attorney. No press. No public.

Lena arrived at 9 a.m., dressed in a conservative blue dress, her red hair pulled back. She looked like a schoolteacher. She looked like a liar.

Assistant DA Farris Coyle greeted her in the hallway outside the jury room. I watched from the judge's private viewing chamber, a small room with a one-way mirror.

"Ms. Croaker," Coyle said, "you understand that you are testifying under oath? Lying to a grand jury is a felony."

"I understand," Lena said.

"And you understand that you have been granted immunity only for crimes related to your husband's bribery scheme? Any other crimes you disclose will not be protected."

"I understand."

"Then let's begin."

The grand jury was twenty-three citizens. Retirees, a few small business owners, a nurse, a truck driver. They looked bored. They'd been told this was a routine corruption case. They had no idea.

Lena took the stand. She raised her right hand. She swore to tell the truth.

Then she lied.

"My husband, Vincent Croaker, has been running a bribery scheme for four years," she began. "He takes money from inmates and their families in exchange for early release. He works with an unnamed judge who signs fraudulent parole documents."

Unnamed judge. That was the deal. I wouldn't be named until the trial. By then, I'd have my immunity.

Coyle asked questions. Lena answered. She described the ledger. She described the payments. She described Vince's temper, his threats, his greed.

She did not mention me. She did not mention the affair. She did not mention that she'd helped Vince every step of the way.

The grand jury listened. They took notes. They looked disgusted.

After two hours, Coyle thanked her and dismissed her. The jury deliberated for fifteen minutes. They returned a true bill. Vince Croaker was indicted on fifty-three counts of bribery, conspiracy, and official misconduct.

The bailiffs arrested Vince at his home at 11 a.m. He was still in his underwear, still half-drunk. They read him his rights. He screamed my name.

"Cross! Judge Cross set me up! He's the one! He's the judge! Ask him!"

The bailiffs didn't listen. They dragged him to a holding cell. He was denied bail because he was con-

sidered a flight risk. He was taken to the county jail, not Ridgemore. He was alone.

I watched the news coverage from my chambers. Vince's mug shot was ugly. Red eyes, unshaven, mouth twisted in rage. The reporter called him "the corrupt jailer who sold freedom to the highest bidder."

I smiled. Then I called Coyle.

"My immunity," I said.

"Not yet," Coyle replied. "I need your testimony at trial. And I need the video confession. You promised me a video."

"You'll have it. But I want the immunity agreement in writing, signed by the Attorney General."

"You'll have it after Vince is convicted. Not before."

"That's not the deal."

"The deal changed when Lena Croaker mentioned an 'unnamed judge.' The AG wants to know who that is. If it's you, Cross, you're going to have to testify publicly. No more closed sessions."

My blood went cold. "Public testimony? That was never discussed."

"It's being discussed now. The AG thinks the public has a right to know who was signing those fake paroles. If you want immunity, you'll testify in open court. Otherwise, you're just another witness. And witnesses can be prosecuted."

I hung up before I said something I couldn't take back.

I sat in the dark for a long time. Public testimony meant my face on every news channel. My name in every newspaper. The end of my career. The end of my life.

But the alternative was worse. If I didn't testify, Coyle would indict me. I'd go to trial. I'd lose. I'd die in prison.

Unless I ran.

I opened my safe. Fifty thousand in cash. Four passports. A gun. I could be in Mexico by midnight.

But Lena. She still had the original ledger. And she wanted her half. Two million dollars. If I ran without paying her, she'd give the ledger to the press. I'd be hunted forever.

No. Running wasn't the answer. The answer was to

destroy everyone. Vince. Coyle. Lena. All of them.

I called Emil Voss.

"Change of plans," I said. "Lena dies tonight. Before she testifies again. And I need you to plant evidence on Coyle. Bribes, stolen money, anything. Make him dirty."

"That's two jobs. One hundred fifty thousand."

"Fine. Do it."

I hung up and looked at Eleanor's photo. She seemed sadder than before.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "But this is who I am now."

The phone rang. It was Vince. How he got a phone in jail, I didn't know. But his voice was clear and cold.

"Cross," he said. "You think you've won. But I've got something you don't know about. Lena's sister. She has a copy of the ledger. The real one. Not the one Lena showed you. The one with your name on every page."

"You're lying."

"Try me. Her name is Marie. She lives in Toledo. Go see her. She'll show you. And then you'll know that your immunity deal is worthless. Because the AG already has a copy. I sent it yesterday."

The line went dead.

I sat in the dark, my heart pounding. For the first time in ten years, I was afraid.

Really afraid.

The sister

Toledo was a three-hour drive through rain so heavy it felt like driving underwater. I took back roads, no tolls, no cameras. I wore a baseball cap and sunglasses, even though the sky was the color of lead.

Marie Croaker lived in a brick duplex on a street of identical brick duplexes. The porch light was burned out. The lawn was dead. A child's bicycle lay on its side in the driveway.

I knocked. No answer. I knocked again. A woman's voice called out, "Who is it?"

"A friend of Vince's. He sent me."

The door opened a crack. A chain held it. A woman's eye peered through the gap. She had Lena's green eyes, but older. Tired.

"I don't know you."

"I'm a lawyer. Vince is in trouble. He asked me to pick up some documents."

"What documents?"

"A ledger. He said you have a copy."

The door closed. I heard the chain slide. Then the door opened fully.

Marie Croaker was forty-five, heavyset, with gray-streaked hair and a face that had seen too many bad nights. She wore a housecoat and slippers. She smelled of cigarettes and coffee.

"Come in," she said. "But if you're lying, I have a gun."

The living room was small and cluttered. Religious icons on the walls. A crucifix over the TV. A cat slept on the sofa.

"Sit," Marie said. "You want coffee?"

"No. I want the ledger."

She sat across from me, her hands folded. "Vince called me this morning. He said you might come. He

said you're not a lawyer. He said you're the judge who ruined him."

I didn't deny it. "Vince ruined himself. I just handed him the shovel."

"He's my brother. He was a good man before he met you."

"No. He was a greedy man who found an opportunity. Just like me."

Marie stared at me for a long moment. Then she stood up and walked to a bookshelf. She pulled out a Bible. Inside, between the pages of Psalms, was a folded sheaf of papers.

The ledger. The real one.

She handed it to me. I opened it. Vince's handwriting. But different from the copy Lena had stolen. This one had my name. Page after page. Judge Marshall Cross. The dates. The amounts. The names of the inmates.

Fifty-three entries. Fifty-three crimes. My crimes.

"The AG has a copy?" I asked.

Marie nodded. "Vince mailed it yesterday. Certified mail. He has the receipt."

I closed the ledger. My hands were steady, but my heart wasn't. I was holding my own death warrant.

"Why are you showing me this?" I asked.

"Because Vince wants to make a deal. He'll destroy the AG's copy if you destroy the video confession and get him released. He wants to go to Canada. He wants Lena back. He wants his life."

"Lena is testifying against him. She doesn't want him back."

Marie smiled. It was a sad smile. "You don't know Lena. She's been playing you from the start. She and Vince are still together. The affair with you? It was her idea. Vince's too. They wanted to get close to you. To control you. To eventually take everything."

The room tilted. I grabbed the arm of the chair.

"You're lying."

"I'm not. Lena never left Vince. The separation was fake. The ledger you saw was fake. The only real thing is this one. And the AG's copy. You've been played, Judge. By two people you thought you were playing."

I stood up. I wanted to hit her. I wanted to burn

the house down. But I did neither. I just stood there, breathing.

"Tell Vince I'll think about his deal."

"Don't think too long. The AG is presenting the evidence to a federal grand jury next week. You have until then."

I left. I drove to a rest stop and sat in the car for an hour. The rain stopped. The sun came out. It was the ugliest day I'd ever seen.

Lena. Playing me. The affair. The motel. The sex. All of it a setup.

I called her. No answer. I called Vince's jail phone. No answer.

I called Emil Voss.

"Kill Lena," I said. "Tonight. And find Vince's sister, Marie. Kill her too. And find the AG's copy of the ledger. Burn it."

"That's three murders and a burglary. Two hundred fifty thousand."

"Do it."

I hung up and drove back to the city. The sun was setting. The sky was orange and red, like a wound.

I was no longer a judge. I was no longer a predator. I was a cornered animal. And cornered animals are the most dangerous kind.

But so are the ones doing the cornering.

The night of blood

Emil Voss worked fast. He always did. By midnight, he'd found Lena. She wasn't in Ohio with her mother. She was in a motel, the same Sunset Motor Lodge where we'd met. Room 12.

She wasn't alone.

Voss sent me photos. Lena on the bed. And beside her, naked and grinning, was Vince.

He'd escaped from jail.

I stared at the photo for a full minute. Vince was supposed to be in a maximum-security holding cell. Somehow, he'd gotten out. Which meant he had help. Which meant his reach was longer than I thought.

I called Voss. "He's there. Vince. Kill them both."

"That's double the work. Another fifty."

"Fine. Just do it."

Voss sent a second message twenty minutes later. "Complications. Vince armed. Shot my man. Both fled. Need more men. Another fifty."

"No. You finish the job with what you have. Or I find someone else."

I threw the phone on the passenger seat and drove to the motel myself. I parked down the street, killed the lights, and waited.

At 1 a.m., a car pulled out of the motel parking lot. A black Ford sedan. Tinted windows. I followed at a distance.

The Ford drove to the interstate. Then north. Then east. Then north again. It was circling, trying to lose a tail. I stayed back, using the darkness.

After an hour, the Ford pulled into a truck stop near the state line. I parked behind a semi and watched through binoculars.

Lena got out first. She looked around, nervous. Then Vince. He was limping. Blood on his shirt. Voss's man had hit him.

They walked to a payphone. Vince made a call. Then they got back in the car and drove to a small motel, the kind that rents by the hour. Room 14.

I waited ten minutes. Then I walked to the room and knocked.

"Housekeeping," I said.

The door opened a crack. Vince's face appeared. When he saw me, his eyes went wide.

"You," he said.

"Me."

He tried to close the door. I shoved it open. He stumbled back. Lena screamed.

I stepped inside and closed the door behind me.

The room was small and dirty. A bed, a TV bolted to the dresser, a bathroom with a flickering light. Vince stood in the corner, holding his side. Lena sat on the bed, pulling a sheet over herself.

"You're supposed to be in jail," I said.

"And you're supposed to be dead," Vince replied. "But I guess we're both disappointed."

"The deal," I said. "Your sister told me. You want the video confession destroyed. You want Lena back. You want to go to Canada."

"That's right."

"And what do I get?"

Vince smiled. It was the smile of a man who thought he'd won. "You get to live. That's all. The AG has the ledger. You can't stop that. But you can stop me from testifying against you. I keep quiet, you keep breathing. Fair?"

"Not fair," I said. "But I'll take it."

I pulled out my gun.

Vince's smile faded. "What are you doing?"

"What I should have done a year ago. Ending this."

Lena screamed again. Vince lunged. I shot him twice in the chest. He fell against the wall, slid down, left a red smear on the cheap wallpaper.

Lena scrambled off the bed, ran for the door. I grabbed her arm, threw her back on the bed.

"Please," she sobbed. "Please, Marshall. I loved you."

"You loved my money. You loved Vince's money. You never loved anyone."

I put the gun to her forehead. She closed her eyes.

"I want you to know," I said, "that the last thing you'll ever hear is the truth. I was going to kill you anyway. After you testified. I hired Emil Voss to make it look like an accident. So even if you hadn't betrayed me, you'd still be dead."

She opened her eyes. "I know."

"You know?"

"Vince told me. He's been following Voss for weeks. That's why we ran. That's why we're here."

I lowered the gun. For a moment, I didn't know what to do. Then I heard sirens.

Vince had called the police. The payphone call. He'd tipped them off.

I ran. Out the door, across the parking lot, into my car. I drove through a fence, across a field, onto a side road. The sirens faded behind me.

I didn't stop until I reached the city limits. Then I pulled over and vomited on the side of the road.

Two murders. Vince was dead. Lena was alive. The police had my description. The AG had the ledger. Everything was falling apart.

I called the only person who could help me. Farris Coyle.

"I need that immunity agreement. Now."

"It's too late, Cross. The AG has the ledger. Your name is all over it. I can't protect you."

"Then I'll tell the press about your bribes. Your stolen evidence. Your dead witnesses."

Coyle was silent for a moment. Then he said, "You're threatening me?"

"I'm making a deal. You get me immunity, I keep quiet. You don't, we both go down."

"I'll see what I can do."

He hung up. I knew he wouldn't do anything. He was probably already typing up a warrant for my arrest.

I had twenty-four hours. Maybe less.

I drove to my penthouse, packed a bag, and emptied the safe. One hundred fifty thousand in cash. Four passports. The gun. The video confession.

I was about to leave when the door opened.

Lena stood there. Blood on her dress. Vince's blood.

"You forgot something," she said.

She held up the real ledger. The one I'd taken from Marie.

"Give it to me," I said.

"No. This is my insurance. You're going to drive me to the Canadian border. You're going to give me half your cash. And then you're going to disappear. If I ever see you again, I give this to the press."

I looked at her. The woman I'd slept with. The woman I'd planned to kill. The woman who'd played me from the start.

"Fine," I said. "Let's go."

We left together. The last thing I saw was Eleanor's photo on the mantel. She wasn't sad anymore. She was disgusted.

So was I.

The long road north

The drive to the Canadian border was twelve hours of silence and paranoia. Lena sat in the passenger seat, the ledger clutched to her chest like a religious artifact. I drove. The road unspooled ahead of us, a black ribbon through the dark.

We crossed into Vermont by dawn. The mountains were blue and cold. Snow on the higher peaks. I hadn't slept in thirty hours. My eyes burned. My hands shook.

"Pull over," Lena said. "I need coffee."

"We don't stop until we cross the border."

"I said pull over."

I pulled over at a gas station. She went inside. I sat in the car, watching the mirrors. No cops. No black sedans. No Emil Voss.

She came back with two coffees and a bag of donuts. She handed me a cup.

"You look terrible," she said.

"I've had a bad week."

She laughed. It was the first time I'd heard her laugh without cruelty. It almost sounded human.

"You know," she said, "it didn't have to be this way. We could have been partners. Real partners."

"You were sleeping with Vince the whole time. You were never my partner."

"I was sleeping with you too. That was real. The rest was business."

I didn't believe her. But I didn't argue. There was no point.

We drove on. The sun rose. The world turned golden. It was beautiful. I hated it.

At 11 a.m., we reached the border crossing at Niagara Falls. A small checkpoint. A bored guard in a blue uniform.

"Passports," he said.

I handed him one of my fakes. Canadian. The name was David Chen. The photo was mine, but with glasses and a beard I'd glued on in the bathroom.

Lena handed him her real passport. She wasn't running. She was going home.

The guard looked at both. He looked at us. He looked at the car.

"Purpose of visit?" he asked.

"Tourism," I said. "Niagara Falls."

"How long?"

"A week."

He nodded. He handed back the passports. "Enjoy your stay."

The gate lifted. I drove through.

Canada. The land of maple syrup and extradition treaties. I wasn't safe here. But I was safer than the States.

Lena directed me to a small town called St. Catharines. She had a friend there. A woman who ran a boarding house. No questions asked.

We arrived at noon. The boarding house was a Victorian mansion painted pale yellow. A woman named Mrs. Harrigan met us at the door. She was sixty, gray-haired, with sharp eyes.

"Lena," she said. "It's been a long time."

"Too long. This is David. He needs a room for a few days."

Mrs. Harrigan looked at me. She didn't ask questions. She just nodded.

I paid cash for a week. Lena took a room down the hall.

That night, I sat on the bed and looked at the video confession. Thirty minutes of Vince bragging about our crimes. It was still useful. I could use it to bargain with the authorities. Or I could destroy it and disappear.

I chose to keep it. Insurance.

There was a knock at the door. Lena.

"Can I come in?"

I opened the door. She was wearing a silk robe. Her hair was down. She looked like she did in the motel.

Before everything fell apart.

"What do you want?"

"To say goodbye. I'm leaving in the morning. Going west. Vancouver. Maybe Alaska."

"You're not taking the ledger?"

She held it up. "I'm keeping it. But I'm not using it. Not unless you come after me."

"I won't come after you."

"I know." She stepped closer. "One more night, Marshall. For old times."

I should have said no. I should have closed the door. But I didn't. I let her in.

We didn't sleep. We talked. About Vince. About the money. About the future. She told me things I didn't know. How Vince had first approached her about seducing me. How she'd resisted at first, then agreed when he promised her a cut. How she'd grown to actually like me, which surprised her.

"You're a monster," she said. "But you're an interesting monster."

"You're a monster too."

"I know." She kissed me. "That's why we worked."

In the morning, she was gone. The ledger was gone. The cash was gone too. Fifty thousand dollars. She'd taken it while I slept.

I laughed. I couldn't help it. She'd played me one last time.

I had one hundred thousand left. Enough to start over. Somewhere far away.

I looked at the video confession. Then I looked at the news on my phone.

"Escapee Vince Croaker Found Dead in Motel Room. Wife Lena Croaker Wanted for Questioning. Judge Marshall Cross Missing, Believed Fled Jurisdiction."

They were looking for me. They had my photo on every news site. I was a fugitive.

I shaved my beard, cut my hair, put on glasses. I looked like a different person. Not a judge. Not a murderer. Just a tired man in a cheap suit.

I left the boarding house at noon. I took a bus to Toronto. Then a flight to London under my fake passport.

In London, I bought a new identity from a forger in Whitechapel. Cost me twenty thousand pounds. My new name was Edward Cross. No relation. I was a retired accountant from Manchester.

I rented a flat in a quiet neighborhood. I bought a cat. I watched the news.

And I waited.

The FBI never came. The RCMP never came. After six months, I stopped looking over my shoulder.

I had survived.

But survival isn't living. And I wasn't living. I was just existing. Waiting for the day when Lena would sell the ledger. Or the AG would find me. Or my own guilt would finally eat me alive.

That day came sooner than I expected.

The past returns

Eight months after I fled to London, I received a letter. No return address. Postmarked from Vancouver.

Inside was a single sheet of paper. Typewritten.

"Dear Marshall,

I'm in trouble. Vince's brother, Frank, found me. He wants the ledger. He wants revenge. He's killed two of my friends. I need your help.

Meet me at the Vancouver Public Library. November 15th. Noon. Come alone.

If you don't come, I'll send the ledger to the FBI. Your choice.

—Lena"

I read the letter three times. Frank Croaker. Vince's younger brother. A former marine with a record of assault. He'd been in prison himself, for beating a man nearly to death. He was the kind of man who solved problems with his fists.

If he had the ledger, he had power over me. If he killed Lena, he'd have the ledger. And then he'd come for me.

I had to go. Not for Lena. For the ledger.

I flew to Vancouver under my fake passport. Edward Cross, retired accountant. I stayed in a budget hotel near the library. I didn't sleep.

November 15th. Noon. The library was a grand building with marble columns and tall windows. Tourists took photos. Students studied at long tables.

Lena was sitting in the back, near the reference section. She looked thinner. Older. Her red hair was now brown, cut short. She wore no makeup.

I sat across from her.

"You came," she said.

"You left me a choice."

"I know." She pushed an envelope across the table. "The ledger. I'm giving it to you. No strings."

I didn't touch it. "Why?"

"Because Frank is going to kill me anyway. I'd rather you have it than him. At least you might do something useful with it."

"Like what?"

"Burn it. Use it to bargain. I don't care. Just keep it away from Frank."

I took the envelope. It was heavy. Fifty-three pages of damnation.

"Where is Frank now?"

"He's in town. He followed me from Alaska. He's been watching the library all week. He's probably outside right now."

I looked toward the windows. A man in a dark coat stood across the street, pretending to read a newspaper. Frank Croaker. Bigger than Vince. Meaner.

"Come with me," I said.

"Where?"

"Anywhere. We can run together. Disappear."

She shook her head. "I'm tired of running. I'm going to face him. One way or another, it ends today."

"That's suicide."

"Maybe. But it's my choice."

She stood up. She kissed my cheek. Then she walked toward the exit.

I watched her go. I should have stopped her. I should have gone with her. But I didn't. I sat there, holding the ledger, as she walked out the door.

Through the window, I saw Frank cross the street. He said something to Lena. She replied. He pulled out a gun.

I closed my eyes. I heard two shots. Then screaming.

When I opened my eyes, Lena was on the ground. Frank was running. Police sirens wailed in the distance.

I didn't go to her. I couldn't. I walked out the back exit, through the loading dock, into an alley. I hailed a taxi and went back to my hotel.

That night, I burned the ledger in the bathroom

sink. Page by page. The flames turned the paper black. The smoke smelled like truth dying.

Lena died at the hospital two hours later. Frank was arrested at the airport. He had the gun. He had motive. He had no alibi.

He would go to prison for the rest of his life. Vince's revenge, posthumously delivered.

I flew back to London the next day. Edward Cross, retired accountant, returning from a disappointing holiday.

But I wasn't Edward Cross. I was Marshall Cross. Murderer. Bribe-taker. Judge.

And I was alone.

The long middle

The next two years were a gray blur. I lived in the London flat, fed the cat, watched American news on satellite TV. The FBI had closed my case due to lack of evidence. Without the ledger, without Lena, without Vince, they had nothing but suspicion.

I was a free man. But freedom is a cage when you have nowhere to go.

I thought about Eleanor. My dead wife. The only good thing in my life. If she hadn't died, would I have become a monster? Or was the monster always there, waiting for an excuse?

I didn't know. I didn't want to know.

One night, I got drunk and called Farris Coyle. He answered on the fifth ring.

"Cross? Is that you?"

"It's me. I'm alive."

"Where are you?"

"Somewhere you can't reach. I have a question. The immunity deal. Was it ever real?"

Coyle laughed. It was a hollow sound. "No. The AG never agreed. I was stringing you along. I wanted the video confession. That's all."

"You're a bastard, Coyle."

"So are you. That's why we got along."

He hung up. I finished the bottle. The cat watched me with indifferent eyes.

The next morning, I made a decision. I was going to write everything down. Every bribe. Every murder. Every lie. A confession. Not to the police. To myself.

I bought a leather-bound journal and a fountain pen. I started writing.

"My name is Marshall Cross. I was a judge. I am a criminal. This is my story."

I wrote for three months. Three hundred pages. Every detail. Every name. Every scream I ignored.

When I finished, I sealed the journal in a box and mailed it to my lawyer in New York. With instructions, publish after my death.

Let the world know. Let them judge me. I didn't care anymore.

Then one day, there was a knock at the door.

I opened it. A woman stood there. Late thirties. Dark hair. Familiar eyes.

"Judge Cross?" she said.

"I'm Edward Cross. You have the wrong person."

"No, I don't." She held up a photo. Me. In my robe.

On the bench. “My name is Nina Croaker. Vince and Lena’s daughter.”

I stepped back. The girl I’d never met. The one who’d lived with her grandmother. She was a woman now. And she had my eyes.

Not Vince’s. Not Lena’s. Mine.

“You’re my father,” she said. “Lena told me before she died. You’re my real father.”

The world stopped.

The daughter

I let her in. What else could I do?

Nina Croaker, Nina Cross, she said, sat on my sofa and told me her story. She was twenty-five. A law student. She'd known about me since she was eighteen, when Lena confessed on her deathbed.

"She said you didn't know," Nina said. "She said the affair was real. That she got pregnant, and Vince agreed to raise me as his own. In exchange, she helped him with the bribery scheme."

"That's why she stayed with him," I said. "Not for love. For you."

Nina nodded. "She wanted to protect me. Vince was dangerous. If he'd known I wasn't his, he might have killed us both."

I looked at her. My daughter. Same jaw. Same eyes. Same stubborn chin.

"Why are you here?" I asked.

"Because I want to know who you are. The real you. Not the judge. Not the criminal. The man."

"There is no man. There's only the criminal."

"I don't believe that."

"Then you're naive. Law school hasn't taught you much."

She didn't flinch. "I've read your file. The real one. The one the FBI still has. I know what you did. I know about the bribes, the forgeries, the people you set free. I even know about Emil Voss."

"Then you know I'm a monster."

"I know you're a human being who made choices. Bad choices. But you also loved my mother. In your own way."

I laughed. It was bitter. "I used your mother. I planned to kill her."

"And she planned to kill you. But she didn't. And you didn't. In the end, you both walked away."

"She walked away. I ran."

"Same thing."

We talked for hours. She told me about her childhood. Vince was a brutal father. He beat her. He beat Lena. She grew up afraid. But she also grew up determined. She was the first in her family to go to college. She paid her own way. She never took a dime of bribe money.

"I'm not like you," she said. "I'm not like any of you. I'm going to be a prosecutor. I'm going to put people like you in jail."

"Then why are you sitting here, talking to me? Why not call the FBI?"

She smiled. It was Lena's smile. But softer. "Because you're my father. And because you're already in jail. Your own jail. The one you built in your head."

She left that evening. She gave me her phone number. She said she'd visit again.

I watched her walk down the street. My daughter. A law student. A future prosecutor.

I had never been prouder of anyone in my life. And I had never been more ashamed.

The reckoning

Nina visited every month for a year. We talked. We argued. We sometimes sat in silence, watching the rain.

She told me about her cases. She was clerking for a federal judge. She was brilliant. She was going to change the world.

I told her about my past. The bribes. The murders. The affair with her mother. I didn't spare myself. I didn't ask for forgiveness.

"Do you regret it?" she asked one day.

"Every minute," I said.

"Then why did you do it?"

"Because I could. Because no one stopped me. Because the system is broken, and I was the one holding the hammer."

She nodded. She understood. That was the worst part. She understood.

On the one-year anniversary of our first meeting, she brought news. The FBI had reopened my case. A new agent, young and ambitious, had found a witness I'd missed. A former inmate who'd seen me take a bribe.

"They're going to extradite you," Nina said. "They know you're in London. They have your address."

"Then I'll run again."

"No." She grabbed my hand. "You won't. You're going to turn yourself in. You're going to face what you did. And I'm going to be there with you."

"Why?"

"Because you're my father. And because it's the only way you'll ever be free."

I looked at her. My daughter. My conscience.

"Okay," I said. "I'll do it."

She flew with me to New York. We walked into the FBI field office together. I confessed to everything. The agents were stunned. They'd been looking for me for three years. And here I was, walking in the front door.

I was arrested. I was charged with fifty-three counts of bribery, conspiracy, and obstruction of justice. I was denied bail. I was sent to a federal detention center to await trial.

Nina visited me every week. She wasn't my lawyer. She was my witness. My proof that I was capable of something other than destruction.

The trial was a media circus. Every news channel carried it. The Honorable Marshall Cross, the corrupt judge who sold freedom. The photos were everywhere. The testimony was damning.

I didn't fight. I pleaded guilty to all charges. The judge—a man I'd mentored years ago—asked if I had anything to say before sentencing.

I stood up. I looked at the gallery. Nina was there. So were the families of the people I'd set free. The guard who'd been paralyzed by Dario Mance. The children of a woman murdered by an inmate I'd released.

"I am guilty," I said. "Not just of the crimes I'm charged with, but of betraying the trust of every person who ever believed in justice. I have no excuse. I have no defense. I only have the truth: I was a corrupt man in a position of power. And I used that power to destroy lives."

I turned to the families. "I'm sorry. I know that's not enough. It will never be enough. But it's all I have."

The judge sentenced me to forty years in federal prison. No parole. No early release.

I was taken away in handcuffs. The last thing I saw was Nina, crying. But she was also smiling.

The prisoner

Federal prison was different from the state prisons I'd helped empty. It was cleaner. More orderly. But it was still a cage.

I was assigned to a medium-security facility in Pennsylvania. My cell was eight by ten. A bed, a toilet, a small desk. A window with bars.

The other inmates recognized me. Some spat at me. Some asked for legal favors. Most just ignored me.

I kept to myself. I read. I exercised. I wrote letters to Nina.

She wrote back every week. She told me about her life. Her first job as a prosecutor. Her first conviction. Her first loss.

She was happy. That was all that mattered.

One day, a new inmate arrived. He was young, thin, with dead eyes. I recognized him immediately.

Dario Mance.

He'd been caught two years ago, trying to rob another armored truck. This time, the guards shot him. He survived. He was sentenced to life.

He saw me in the yard. He walked over, his limp pronounced.

"Judge Cross," he said. "Fancy meeting you here."

"Mance."

"You got me out once. Can you do it again?"

I shook my head. "I'm not a judge anymore. I'm just an inmate."

"That's a shame." He smiled. It was the same shark smile. "Because I remember what you did. And I remember that you took three hundred thousand dollars from me. I want it back."

"It's gone. Spent. Buried."

"Then I'll take it out of your hide."

He walked away. That night, he and two of his friends jumped me in the shower. They beat me badly. Broken ribs. A fractured jaw. A concussion.

I spent two weeks in the infirmary. Nina visited. She was furious.

"I'll file a complaint," she said. "I'll get you transferred."

"No," I said. "I deserve this. Every punch. Every bruise."

"You don't deserve to be beaten by that animal."

"Maybe not. But I deserve to be in pain. It's the only thing that feels real anymore."

She didn't understand. She was young. She still believed in justice.

I didn't. I believed in consequences.

The visitor

I was transferred to a different facility after the beating. A maximum-security prison in West Virginia. The inmates were harder. The guards were crueler. The walls were higher.

I was placed in solitary confinement for my own protection. Twenty-three hours a day in a concrete box. One hour in a steel cage for exercise.

I went mad. Not the screaming kind. The quiet kind. I stopped talking. I stopped eating. I stared at the wall for days.

The guards force-fed me. The psychologist visited. I said nothing.

Then one day, a visitor came. Not Nina. Someone else.

Farris Coyle.

He'd been disbarred two years ago. The evidence I'd planted on him, the fake bribery records, had finally been exposed as forgeries. He'd lost everything. His job. His reputation. His family.

He sat across from me in the visiting room, separated by glass.

"You ruined me," he said.

"You tried to ruin me first."

"I'm here to tell you something. The AG's copy of the ledger? It wasn't destroyed. It was found in Vince's sister's house after she died. The FBI has it. Every page. Your name on every one."

"I know. I confessed."

"Confession doesn't matter. The ledger proves you were the mastermind. Vince was just the errand boy. You'll never get out. Not even for good behavior."

"I don't want to get out."

Coyle stared at me. "You really have gone mad."

"Maybe. Or maybe I've finally found my conscience."

He left. I was taken back to my cell. I lay on the concrete bed and stared at the ceiling.

Conscience. Such a small word for such a heavy burden.

The letter

Five years into my sentence, I received a letter from Nina. Not her usual cheerful update. This one was different.

"Dad,

I've been doing some research. About Mom. About Vince. About you.

I found something you need to know. The ledger that the FBI has? It's incomplete. The last page is missing. The page with the name of the most important person in the whole scheme.

The person who started it all.

It wasn't Vince. It wasn't you. It was someone else. Someone who paid Vince to recruit you. Someone who's still out there. Still free. Still taking bribes.

I'm going to find them. I'm going to bring them to justice.

I wanted you to know. Not to give you hope. But to give you purpose.

Your daughter,

Nina"

I read the letter three times. Someone else. Someone above me. Someone who'd been pulling the strings from the beginning.

I thought back. The first bribe. The defense attorney, Leo Karr. He'd offered me money to reduce the DUI charge. But who had put him up to it? Who had the money? Who had the connections?

Leo Karr was dead. Car accident. Three years ago. Convenient.

I wrote back to Nina.

"Be careful. The people you're looking for are more dangerous than me. They're still in power. They'll kill you if you get too close.

But if you find them, tell them Marshall Cross sends his regards."

I never heard back.

The end of the line

Ten years into my sentence, I was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. The same cancer that killed Eleanor.

The doctors gave me six months.

Nina visited. She was thirty-five now. A successful prosecutor. She'd won thirty cases. She'd put away murderers, rapists, and corrupt politicians.

But she hadn't found the person behind the ledger.

"I'm sorry, Dad," she said. "I tried. But every lead went cold. Every witness disappeared. Every document was sealed."

"It's okay," I said. "Some monsters can't be caught. They're too well protected."

"That's not justice."

"No. That's the world."

She held my hand through the glass. We were both crying.

"I love you, Dad."

"I love you too, Nina. I'm sorry I wasn't there for you. I'm sorry I was the man I was."

"You're not that man anymore."

"No. But I was. And I can't undo it."

She visited every week until the end. The cancer spread. The pain was constant. The morphine helped, but not enough.

On my last day, I asked the guard to call Nina. She arrived two hours later. They let her into my cell. Compassionate care.

She sat on the edge of my bed. She read to me. A poem. I don't remember which one.

I closed my eyes. I saw Eleanor. She was smiling. She was holding out her hand.

“Marsh,” she said. “Come home.”

I took her hand.

And then I was gone.

Epilogue (Nina's Voice)

My father died on a Tuesday. The prison chaplain said a few words. No one else came. Just me.

I had him cremated. I spread his ashes in the river near the courthouse where he'd once presided. It seemed fitting. He was part of that place. Part of its corruption. Part of its history.

After the funeral, I went back to work. I had a new case. A big one. A judge. Not a corrupt judge like my father. Worse. A judge who'd been taking bribes for twenty years. Who'd sent innocent people to prison. Who'd protected guilty ones.

His name was Judge Arthur Kellogg. He was the man behind the ledger. The man who'd recruited Leo Karr. The man who'd paid Vince Croaker. The man who'd set my father on the path to damnation.

I had the proof. A witness. A former clerk who'd seen Kellogg take a cash bribe in his chambers.

The trial was in six months. I was going to prosecute him myself.

I stood in front of the courthouse, looking up at the stone columns. My father had stood here too. A different man. A different time.

"I'll finish what you started," I whispered. "I'll bring justice. Real justice."

The wind blew. The flags snapped. And for a moment, I felt my father's hand on my shoulder.

Then it was gone.

I walked up the steps. The doors opened. Inside, the courtroom waited.

The gavel was silent.

But not for long.

The gavel falls
(Nina's Voice, Continued)

The trial of Judge Arthur Kellogg lasted six weeks. Every day, I sat at the prosecutor's table, facing the man who had destroyed my family. He was seventy-two, white-haired, with the calm smile of a man who'd never been held accountable for anything.

His defense attorney was Leo Karr's former partner, a weasel named Simon Drake. He argued that the witness was lying. That the cash was a loan. That Kellogg was a pillar of the community.

The jury didn't believe him.

On the sixth week, they returned a verdict. Guilty on all counts. Forty-two counts of bribery, racketeering, and obstruction of justice.

Kellogg showed no emotion as the judge sentenced him to thirty years in federal prison. The same prison where my father had died.

After the trial, I walked outside. The press was there, cameras flashing. They asked me how it felt to convict the man who had corrupted my father.

"It feels like justice," I said. "Not the kind my father sold. The kind he found in the end."

I walked away. I didn't look back.

That night, I went to the river where I'd spread my father's ashes. I sat on the bank and watched the water flow.

"It's done," I said. "He's going to prison. He'll never hurt anyone again."

The water didn't answer. But I felt a sense of peace. Not closure. Peace.

I stood up and walked back to my car. The courthouse lights glowed in the distance. The gavel was silent. But tomorrow, it would fall again. And again. And again.

That was the nature of justice. It never ended. It just changed hands.

My father had held the gavel and used it for evil. I held the law and used it for good. We were two sides of the same coin. Both flawed. Both human.

But in the end, he had chosen to confess. To face his crimes. To accept his punishment.

That was his redemption. Not forgiveness. Redemption.

And mine? My redemption was to carry on. To fight the good fight. To never become the monster he had been.

I drove home. The city lights blurred past. I thought about my mother, Lena. I thought about Vince. I thought about the ledger, now locked in an evidence locker, never to see the light of day.

And I thought about my father's last words to me, whispered in his cell, his hand in mine.

"The gavel falls only once, Nina. After that, it's just wood and silence. But the silence? That's where the real work begins."

He was right.

The silence was where I would do my work. Where I would build a legacy he never could.

The gavel had fallen on his life.

Now it was my turn to pick it up.

THE END

The gaveland and the gallows

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without the prior written permission of the author or the publisher of this book.

I learned early that justice is a commodity, like heroin or high-end whiskey. You just need the right customer.

Thanos Kalamidas, a multipublished writer, cartoonist and illustrator; born and grew up in a picturesque neighbourhood on the mountainside of Hymettus in Athens, Greece. Then his life took him to Berlin, Germany and to London, UK for studies. After a brief stay in Yorkshire he moved his life to Paris, France while working in Tokyo, Japan and in Cape Town, South Africa. In the last 25 years he became a permanent Scandinavian resident and recently, in his glorious sixth decade, he moved to a scenic village in the Växjö area.

THE GAVELAND AND THE GALLOWS

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED